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# Introduction and Overview

## 1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT AND FINDINGS

More countries today call themselves democratic than ever before in history, but the elections they hold are often marred by electoral manipulation. Electoral manipulation – the set of practices that includes, among other things, stuffing ballot boxes, buying votes, and intimidating voters or candidates – violates basic political freedoms, undermines the function of elections as mechanisms of accountability, destroys confidence in electoral and democratic institutions, and can lead to social strife, to list only a few of its damaging effects. And electoral manipulation is widespread: according to my estimates, about one in four country-level executive elections in the past two decades were substantially manipulated. To place the issue in historical perspective, more elections were manipulated in 2000 than there were democracies in 1950. Despite the prevalence and the important consequences of electoral manipulation, our empirical and theoretical understanding of its causes is still limited and, crucially, cannot account for some of electoral manipulation's most common, and most pernicious, manifestations.

The central question animating this study is: why do parties, candidates, and governments utilize electoral manipulation? On an obvious level, politicians use manipulation to win, as a final push to bring their vote totals past the post. This perspective is widely held in the scholarly literature and in policy circles; but, as I show in this book, it leaves fundamental puzzles unaddressed. First, electoral manipulation is often utilized when it is patently unnecessary for victory. Second, even when electoral manipulation is needed to win, it is frequently perpetrated far beyond the victory threshold and in excess of any plausible safety margin. Third, electoral manipulation is often perpetrated blatantly, a practice that does not directly contribute to victory and goes against the intuition that, as with any cheating, the perpetrator stands only to lose if

his or her activities become known. These three observations constitute what I shall call the puzzle of excessive and blatant electoral manipulation.

One recent example of this puzzle is furnished by the Russian presidential election of 2004. With levels of popularity and job approval that would make almost any Western leader envious, incumbent president Vladimir Putin was by all accounts certain to win. Nevertheless, his government grossly manipulated the election – by some estimates adding close to 10 million votes, or more than one-fifth of Putin's total – and Putin won by an enormous margin of victory, with 49 million votes against 9 million for his strongest opponent. In this case, large-scale electoral manipulation was utilized where a clean vote would have sufficed not only to win, but to win overwhelmingly.[1] The 2009 election in Iran, arguably rigged by the government on a massive scale, also resulted in an impressive margin of victory in favor of the government's candidate, of more than one-fourth the size of the electorate, or about 11 million votes.[2] Many other examples of excessive and blatant manipulation are found in the electoral histories of a range of otherwise diverse countries, and in various time periods, including present-day Belarus, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Yemen, as well as in Mexico under the PRI, and Paraguay under Stroessner, to name a few.

The prevailing set of ideas about the goals and logic of electoral manipulation – to which I subsequently refer as the "prevailing wisdom" on electoral manipulation – holds that the aim of manipulation is to help win the election at hand, and that it is therefore likely to arise in tight races, where a few stolen votes can determine the difference between victory and defeat, and to yield small margins of victory. As one of Joseph Kennedy's sons said about his father, "he was willing to buy as many votes as necessary to win, but he was damned if he would buy a single extra one."[3] The prevailing wisdom also understands electoral manipulation as an activity that ought to be carried out secretly. A recent review piece, for example, concludes that "manifestly fraudulent behaviors . . . are things that only its victims want publicized" (Lehoucq 2003). The logic of frugality and secrecy rests on the notion that electoral manipulation is a costly and risky political strategy.[4]

The prevailing wisdom about electoral manipulation, while intuitive and widely espoused, nevertheless leaves in its wake a core puzzle: the practice of electoral manipulation in much of the world today is simply at odds with

[1] The estimate of the number of votes obtained via manipulation is from Myagkov, Ordeshook, and Shakin (2009). I discuss electoral manipulation in post-Soviet Russia in greater detail in Chapter 6.

[2] As in the Russian example, the Iranian incumbent would likely have won without manipulation (Ansari et al. 2009; Beber and Scacco 2009).

[3] Quoted in Argersinger 1985, 672.

[4] Electoral manipulation generally requires substantial resources, personnel, and planning, and entails the risk of eliciting punishment, inviting international criticism and reprisals, or sparking domestic unrest. I further discuss the costs and the risks of electoral manipulation in Chapter 5.

it. As the examples of Russia and Iran suggest, great effort, expense, and risk are routinely incurred to perpetrate electoral manipulation in situations when it does not – and cannot – contribute to victory, for example when victory could be secured with substantially less manipulation or with none at all. Moreover, electoral manipulation is often pursued in full view of the public – elections in Nigeria and Zimbabwe since independence, for example, have been characterized by blatant methods of electoral manipulation such as voter intimidation; and in Mexico before the 1990s, friends and neighbors could often observe those who were being visited by operatives of the ruling party to buy their votes.[5] In sum, there are many cases for which the prevailing wisdom has analytical purchase, but many others for which it does not. In other words, the literature has not explained, nor has it documented, the considerable heterogeneity in patterns of electoral manipulation.[6]

## The Argument in Brief: Electoral Manipulation and Information

To understand such heterogeneity, it is necessary to expand our understanding of the causes of electoral manipulation beyond the confines of the prevailing wisdom. I develop a novel theory about the incentives of political parties and governments to engage in electoral manipulation. My theory calls into question the idea that the sole aim of electoral manipulation is immediate electoral victory; instead, my theory proposes the argument that *electoral manipulation can potentially yield substantially more than simply winning the election at hand*. Specifically, excessive and blatant manipulation has a series of intended effects that include, among other things: to discourage opposition supporters from turning out to vote or to protest; to convince bureaucrats to remain loyal to the government; to persuade potential financial backers of parties and candidates to avoid supporting the manipulator's opponents (and/or to support the incumbent candidate); to deter political elites from opposing the ruling party or from even entering the political fray; to increase the manipulator's post-electoral bargaining power vis-à-vis other political and social groups such as labor unions and other political parties; to reduce the need to share the rents and spoils of government with elites and organizations; and to enhance the career prospects of politicians at subnational levels of government. Overall, these and similar effects reduce the strength of opposition and expand the incumbent's freedom of action and bargaining power. In other words, I argue that electoral manipulation ought to be understood not merely as a marginal

[5] See Jason 2003 for the case of Nigeria. Elections in post-independence Zimbabwe are discussed in Chapter 6; Mexican elections in Chapter 7.

[6] A second "conventional wisdom" has developed around the study of single-party elections in highly authoritarian systems. I discuss this later in this chapter, as well as in Chapter 3. Simpser (2005) is an earlier effort to document and explain heterogeneity in patterns of electoral manipulation.

vote-getting technique, but also as an important tool for consolidating and monopolizing political power.

At its core, my theory casts elections not only as contests for office, but also as occasions for the *transmission or distortion of information*. Information about the *strength of incumbents and their rivals* is a key ingredient in political decision-making, and electoral manipulation can be strategically deployed to influence such information and, ultimately, the decisions and behaviors of a broad range of actors including politicians, activists, donors, bureaucrats, organizations, and voters, among others.[7] The informational consequences of electoral manipulation can be so strong as to motivate very substantial manipulation efforts even by parties whose victory is a foregone conclusion.

To elaborate, my theory proposes that electoral manipulation gives rise to two categories of effects. The *direct effects* of electoral manipulation refer, loosely speaking, to its contribution to *winning the election at hand*.[8] In addition, electoral manipulation can have *indirect effects*, which refer to the *influence of electoral manipulation on the subsequent choices and behavior of a wide range of political actors*.[9] The items enumerated in the previous paragraph constitute some of the main kinds of indirect effects of electoral manipulation.

As those items suggest, indirect effects can be quite beneficial to the manipulator. More generally, the potential for electoral manipulation to elicit indirect effects raises the stakes of choices by parties and governments about whether, how, and to what extent to manipulate. In addition to possibly influencing who wins the election at hand, electoral manipulation can, via its indirect effects, have consequences for the *value of office-holding*, and for the *future likelihood of holding office*.[10] Politicians presumably care not only about holding office,

[7] The *strength* of a political party depends on a variety of attributes of the party, including its ability to circumvent the law, its access to resources, and its willingness to utilize public resources for partisan ends. It also depends on the likely behavior of the public, including elites and citizens. Importantly, *popularity* may contribute to strength, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for it: unpopular incumbent parties are sometimes perceived as strong (e.g., as being the "only game in town"). Therefore, my theory implies that electoral manipulation can be informative about the manipulator's strength *even if the public knows that the manipulation took place*. In such a scenario, the public would know that electoral results do not reflect the manipulator's popularity, but could still perceive the manipulator as strong – e.g., as able to circumvent the law and access resources for partisan goals. (I discuss these issues further later in this chapter and in Chapter 4).

[8] The text is accurate for the case of a winner-takes-all election under plurality rule. I provide a more general definition of direct effects, encompassing other electoral rules as well as legislative elections, in the Appendix to Chapter 4.

[9] In prior work (Simpser 2003, 2005, and 2008) I referred to these as the *informational effects* of electoral manipulation. I use the term "indirect effects" in the present work to emphasize the fact that the causal chain does not end with information itself, but instead with the effects of such information on behavior.

[10] Accordingly, indirect effects can be categorized as *electoral* and *non-electoral*, depending on whether they are relevant to the manipulating party's chances of holding office in the future, or to that party's scope for action while in office (the two categories overlap).

but also about how far they can advance their goals while they govern – by implementing the policies they prefer, appropriating rents for personal or partisan purposes, or otherwise making use of the machinery of government in the service of their objectives. To illustrate the potential effect of electoral manipulation on the value of office, consider the demands for policy concessions, or for sharing rents, that a business organization or a labor union might make on a ruling party. The use of electoral manipulation by the ruling party to obtain overwhelming electoral victories could effectively restrain such demands, by showing that no one actor is indispensable for the ruling party's hold on power. Overwhelming victories obtained via electoral manipulation can also influence a ruling party's grip on office – for example, by deterring bureaucrats from supporting rivals, or discouraging opposition supporters from turning out to vote.[11] On the flip side, the failure of a manipulating party to obtain an overwhelming electoral victory, for example, could convey weakness, potentially emboldening social and political actors to step up demands and political challenges, and in consequence reduce the party's scope for action while in office, as well as its ability to retain power in the future. In other words, the informational properties of electoral manipulation, which underlie manipulation's indirect effects, imply that the stakes of manipulating are often substantially higher than previously recognized.

The prevailing wisdom and literature on electoral manipulation pays heed mostly to direct effects.[12] I propose and show, in contrast, that electoral manipulation can be, and often is, motivated by its potential for indirect effects. Putin's Kremlin, and Mexico's PRI in its heyday, utilized electoral manipulation not to reach a majority or a plurality of the vote, but to deter and preempt potential challenges to their rule – to nip opposition in the bud, so to speak – and to increase their freedom to act while in office. In sum, I argue that electoral manipulation has an entirely different purpose from (in addition to) its intuitive role as a short-term, marginal vote-getting tactic, a purpose that has been insufficiently appreciated: to shape the behavior of political and social actors in ways that benefit the perpetrator and enhance its political power, potentially over longer time frames than the election at hand. In terms of incentives to manipulate, these motivations have proved to be just as powerful, if not more so, than the drive to reach the victory threshold in the election of the moment.

How exactly does electoral manipulation lead to indirect effects? The core of the mechanism has to do with *information*, and it can be loosely described

[11] Of course, electoral manipulation could simultaneously have effects on the manipulator's (and the other parties') chances of holding office, and on the value of holding office for the ruling party.

[12] I discuss the important contributions of the literatures on electoral authoritarianism (e.g., Geddes 2006; Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007; Wedeen 2008) and on single-party regimes later in this chapter.

in two simple steps. First, under the right conditions (on which more is provided later in this chapter), the consequences to individual citizens, politicians, bureaucrats, and organizations of their political choices and actions today depend strongly on which party ends up holding power tomorrow, and on how powerful such a party turns out to be. Second, electoral manipulation conveys information to the aforementioned actors precisely on these points. In Putin's Russia, for example, the perception that Putin and his associates had an unassailable hold on the Kremlin was largely fostered through the systematic use of excessive electoral manipulation since 2000, and it disciplined the whole political class for at least a decade. In contrast, in Boris Yeltsin's Russia, the widespread perception that Yeltsin's hold on office was tenuous emboldened many bureaucrats, regional officials, and other politicians to either fail to work on his behalf, or to actively support his opponents. To take another example, in Mexico in the 1990s, a history of manipulated elections by the PRI convinced citizens who sympathized with the opposition that casting a vote would at best result in frustration, if not in reprisals, and opposition turnout suffered accordingly.[13]

As these two examples illustrate, electoral manipulation can convey information about two matters that are of central relevance to the choices of actors, such as bureaucrats and citizens, among others. Such actors care about *attributes and capacities of the manipulator*: an incumbent party, for instance, that shows itself able to manipulate an election excessively and blatantly is also likely to have the resources, capacities, and inclinations to overcome or punish opponents, reward supporters, and circumvent the law. In addition, actors care about *how fellow actors are likely to behave*. For example, a citizen who supports an opposition party, yet expects that his or her fellow opposition supporters will stay at home on election day or will sell their vote in exchange for a bribe, is likely to be discouraged from turning out to vote. Insofar as electoral manipulation provides information about attributes of the perpetrator, it functions as a *costly signal*. When it provides information about the likely behavior of other actors, it works as a *coordination device*.[14]

My theory suggests the following distinctions, which I shall utilize throughout the book. Concerning the goals motivating the use of electoral manipulation, it is possible to speak of *manipulation for winning* versus *manipulation for more than winning*. The former is associated with electoral manipulation's direct effects, and the latter with its indirect ones. Concerning the outcomes of electoral manipulation, I shall term electoral manipulation yielding small margins of victory *marginal*, and that which yields large margins *excessive*.[15]

[13] A seminal study of political behavior along these lines in Mexico is Domínguez and McCann 1996 (see also Almond and Verba 1963).

[14] These two informational roles of electoral manipulation can coexist and reinforce each other. In Chapter 4 I develop these ideas further with the aid of simple formal models.

[15] I discuss the operationalization of these concepts in Chapter 3.

Bearing in mind that goals and outcomes are conceptually distinct, for simplicity I shall nevertheless sometimes refer to electoral manipulation aimed at winning as marginal, and to that aimed at more than winning as excessive and/or blatant, hoping that it will be clear from the context whether goals or outcomes are meant.[16] Additionally, it is worth emphasizing that the marginal versus excessive dimension of electoral manipulation does not fully overlap with the question of scale or extent: while excessive electoral manipulation is generally associated with large-scale manipulation, the marginal kind can result either from a low amount of manipulation (e.g., in a tight race) or from a large amount (e.g., when the manipulating party initially lags its rival by a substantial amount, or when two parties' manipulation efforts partially neutralize each other).

The theory advanced in this book covers, in one same framework, a variety of empirical patterns or species of electoral manipulation, including the marginal kind, described by the prevailing wisdom, as well as others that have not been systematically theorized – most importantly the excessive and/or blatant kind. Under what conditions is electoral manipulation likely to be marginal versus excessive or blatant? My theory provides insight into the proximate causes of different patterns of electoral manipulation. Generally speaking, political systems where *power is initially disproportionately concentrated* in the hands of the party in government, and where constraints on the *discretion* of government action – whether domestic or external in origin – are relatively weak, constitute fertile ground for excessive and blatant electoral manipulation. As elections have spread to increasingly diverse institutional and socioeconomic settings in the past few decades, such conditions have come to characterize many electoral systems. Contemporary examples of countries where power and resources are substantially concentrated in the hands of the party in office, and where government discretion is at best moderately constrained by the rule of law, include Nigeria, Zambia, Russia, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, Iran, and Yemen, among many others. In contrast, where these conditions do not hold – for example, where there exist multiple competing centers of political power and resources – electoral manipulation is likely to exhibit a marginal pattern: it will be associated with tight races and slim margins of victory. Examples of the marginal pattern of manipulation include many elections in the United States historically (Campbell 2005), in Costa Rica in the first half of the twentieth century (Lehoucq and Molina 2002), and in the Philippines in the 1950s (Teehankee 2002). The theory offered here, therefore, describes a relationship

[16] In practice, the goals and outcomes of manipulation should often correspond, although the possibility of miscalculation – stemming, for example, from unusually high levels of uncertainty (e.g., about how much manipulation effort is needed to attain a given goal) – implies that this will not always be the case. By and large, however, uncertainty high enough to drive a substantial wedge between goals and outcomes would appear to be rare (for further discussion of this issue and its empirical evidence, see Section 5.4 in Chapter 5).

of sequential causation, where the distribution of power and resources shapes *contemporaneous* incentives to, and possibilities for, electoral manipulation; in turn, electoral manipulation influences the *subsequent* distribution of power and resources.[17] For example, at independence in 1980, Zimbabwe's government inherited a powerful state from its former colonizers, which rendered excessive and blatant manipulation both feasible and attractive for the ruling party ZANU. In turn, excessive manipulation in early elections (e.g., in 1985) further consolidated and increased ZANU's power, bolstering its capacity and its motivation to manipulate excessively and blatantly in subsequent elections (e.g., in 1990).[18]

In sum, I provide an information-based theory of the incentives underlying electoral manipulation. My argument proposes that elections are, at root, not only occasions for deciding who is to hold office, but also processes through which parties might shape public information with the potential to influence the subsequent behavior of social and political actors. In this context, electoral manipulation emerges as an instrument of political control.

## Empirical Findings

In addition to the theoretical contribution sketched in the previous paragraphs, this book accomplishes two empirical goals. First, it provides a *systematic, global picture of electoral manipulation*. To aid in constructing this picture, I have collected an original dataset of electoral manipulation and related variables covering more than 800 multiparty, country-level elections around the world from 1990 through 2007.[19] The data yield some remarkable findings. For example, of all executive elections that were substantially manipulated in roughly the past two decades, more than two in five were won by the manipulating party by a margin of victory exceeding 40 percent of the vote, suggesting that excessive electoral manipulation is quite common.[20]

Second, the book *assesses some of my theory's main empirical implications* in light of quantitative and qualitative evidence from a variety of sources. The major pieces of qualitative evidence are two in-depth case studies (or "cases"), of post-Soviet Russia (1991–2008) and of Zimbabwe (1980–2008), presented in Chapter 6. The cases accomplish a number of tasks: first, they

[17] In the language of dynamic programming, the distribution of power and resources is a state variable, and the extent and blatancy of electoral manipulation are control (i.e., choice) variables. The distribution of power in period $t$ shapes choices about electoral manipulation in the same period $t$, and such choices, in turn, influence the distribution of power in period $t + 1$.

[18] This account of events in Zimbabwe is simplified for illustrative purposes; the case is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

[19] Countries with fewer than 1 million inhabitants are excluded.

[20] The margin of victory is the difference in the percentage of the vote obtained by the winner and the first runner-up according to official results. Further details provided in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

establish that electoral manipulation was used far in excess of what winning or retaining office would have warranted, and that it was perpetrated in a very public manner. Second, the cases show that excessive and blatant electoral manipulation was pursued for its indirect effects – that is, to influence the behavior of opposition politicians, party leaders, their financial backers, regional notables and bosses, voters, and organizations in ways that enhanced the perpetrator's political strength, discretion, and bargaining power. In the case of Zimbabwe, the rationale for excessive and blatant manipulation was explicitly articulated by the president. Third, the cases show how largely exogenous variation in background conditions – specifically, in the power and discretion of the ruling party – gave rise to variation in the patterns of manipulation as predicted by my theory, and that this relationship (between background conditions and patterns of manipulation) played out in similar ways in countries as different as Russia and Zimbabwe. Fourth, the cases indicate how different patterns of manipulation in turn contributed to eliciting different kinds of behavior from social and political actors – a link about which my theory, elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5, makes specific predictions. Fifth, the cases permit the assessment of some alternative explanations for excessive manipulation, supplementing the discussion of alternative explanations at the end of Chapter 5. In addition to these in-depth cases, I provide two briefer discussions of the indirect effects of electoral manipulation. The first mini-case focuses on the effect of electoral manipulation on the bargaining power of the government with respect to labor unions in Mexico, and the second mini-case on the relationship between electoral manipulation and the behavior of bureaucrats in Belarus. These are presented early in Chapter 4.

The quantitative evidence, contained in Chapter 7, continues the exploration of the indirect effects of electoral manipulation. The first two pieces of quantitative analysis focus on a specific actor: the citizen as voter. A major reason for this is data availability. I was able to locate "large N" datasets with information of relevance to my hypotheses for citizens (i.e., information about voting behavior and perceptions of electoral manipulation), but not for other categories of actors such as party elites, bureaucrats, organizations, and donors (these and other categories of actors are covered in the case studies). The first two analyses in Chapter 7 explore the indirect effects of electoral manipulation on voter behavior. The first analysis utilizes survey data for sixty-two elections in fifty-six countries to study the relationship between perceptions about electoral manipulation and the propensity of an individual citizen to cast a vote. The analysis supports an empirical implication of the theory that illustrates the central role of information: citizens – especially opposition supporters – who perceive elections to be manipulated are less likely to turn out to vote.

The second piece of quantitative analysis uses a different source of evidence to study the indirect effects of electoral manipulation on voting behavior. It makes use of the fact that Mexico undertook deep electoral reforms at the national level in the 1990s to construct a quasi-experimental estimate of the

indirect effects of excessive electoral manipulation on voter participation. The analysis compares over-time changes in electoral manipulation and voter participation across the different states of Mexico. The main finding is that excessive and blatant electoral manipulation in Mexico before the 1990s substantially depressed voter participation rates, consistent with the survey findings and with the proposition that such manipulation was pursued by the PRI for its indirect effects.[21]

The final piece of analysis focuses on one of the most general empirical implications of the theory: ultimately, if excessive electoral manipulation yields tangible benefits – as I have argued – it should be associated with a longer duration in office.[22] I test this "reduced-form" idea through a duration analysis based on my original dataset. The analysis shows that excessive electoral manipulation is strongly associated with duration in office, measured either as party duration or leader duration, after controlling for a number of potential confounders.

Overall, the evidence provides strong support for the theory's central ideas. Taken together, the case studies and the quantitative analyses cover a substantial range of the observable implications of the theory. In addition, and throughout this book, I provide evidence, based on my data, about other observable implications of the theory as the discussion calls for it. Nevertheless, the theory is rich enough that future research should be able to identify and to test additional observable implications.

Sometimes, however, a single piece of evidence can be as suggestive as extensive testing of observable implications. One such piece comes from Ukraine, from a set of clandestine recordings in the 1990s of the conversations of then-president Leonid Kuchma. These recordings, known as the Melnychenko tapes, became available in 2000. The tapes contain hundreds of hours of conversations between Kuchma and other prominent figures. They were obtained via a recording device secretly installed in the president's office.[23] The tapes became most famous for linking the president to the murder of a journalist, but they cover a wide range of topics, including the 1999 presidential election.[24] In the

[21] The analysis in that chapter draws a distinction between voter participation elicited by electoral manipulation – e.g., through vote buying or intimidation – and participation choices not directly induced by such tactics.

[22] The empirical implication tested in this analysis, therefore, concerns the *electoral* subcategory of indirect effects – i.e., those with the potential to influence the manipulating party's future chances of retaining office.

[23] The authorities disputed the authenticity of the tapes, claiming that they were a cut-and-paste job of the president's voice. Forensic experts have concluded that it is not possible, on the basis of the available evidence, to prove or disprove the authorities' claim (because only a digital rendering of the original analogue recording is available). There are, however, at least two reasons that make the authorities' claim highly unlikely. First, the tapes contain hundreds of hours of conversations, so any falsification job would have been a monumental task. Second, the conversations in the tape – for example, on the topics of Chechnya and on the conduct of elections – correspond closely to the facts and events of the time (see Arel 2001).

[24] The murder is covered in detail in Koshiw 2003.